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Reforms in Greek Education 1991 -2011: Reforms or Something Else?

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Abstract

Reform is often based on the principle that there is always a better alternative to the current situation. Given that education, among other characteristics, also has a high economic value, then the pursuit of a 'better' education (and hence the recognition of meaningful reforms that are sustainable in the long-term, and the optimal adjustment of the educational organizations to new environmental elements so that their needs are met) becomes crucially important at critical times. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the educational reforms that have taken place in the Greek educational system (at all levels of education) over the last few years. This study supports the view that if Greece wants to overcome the crisis in the economy and implement substantial educational reforms it should be prepared to follow a stable, long-term and innovative educational policy (without serving mainly political goals) that calls for the systematic treatment of all educational problems in an environment of constructive and realistic dialogue with all relevant groups, and, most importantly, ensures that the school system has the capacity to implement and sustain the educational reforms.

Introduction and Aims of the Study

It is evident that we are living in an era of radical change and that the only certainty for the future is an environment of continual change. Public education is no exception to the rule. In the context of educational processes, reform is of great importance as it changes the rhythm of the functioning of an organization or situation, or renovates the system, with the aim of achieving better outcomes. An educational system is not reformed simply by, for example, the legal replacement of one teaching method with another or a change in the curriculum. On the contrary, reform involves the transformation or renovation of the entire educational system, both qualitatively and quantitatively (Hargreaves, 2002; Ifanti, 2011; Popkewitz, 1988; Terzis, 2010; Weiler, 1989).

Given that education, among other characteristics, also has a high economic value, then the pursuit of a 'better' education - through the recognition of meaningful reforms that are sustainable in the long-term, and the optimal adjustment of the educational organizations to new environmental elements - becomes crucially important at critical times.

It is true that over the last two years Greece has been suffering from severe economic problems in its attempt to restore fiscal stability during a time of heavy recession, but it is equally true that educational units need to be adjusted to the demands and requirements of environmental standards. During the first decade of the new millennium many attempts have been made to restructure and, somehow, 're-invent' the Greek education system. However, the adjustment strategies adopted for the improvement of the Greek educational units do not appear to have had their intended impact. It must be kept in mind that the keys of success are: a) not just a matter of simply changing a situation but "how to sustain changes, to keep them going, make them last"

(Hargreaves, 2002, p.190), b) to observe how the policymakers coordinate all the efforts needed for implementation, and c) to make the relevant agents understand and be convinced of the necessity for change after a constructive and realistic dialogue with them (Ainscow, Muijs and West, 2006a; Borko, et.al. 2003; Fullan, 2006; House, 2000). Thus, for the successful and enduring practice of educational reforms two things are necessary: what is called "policy pedagogy" and "systemic reform" (Borko, et.al., 2003, p.173).

Based on the latter concepts and aiming for greater efficiency and effectiveness in the Greek education system, the last two decades have witnessed the creation of an enormous number of Greek educational reforms (Ifanti, 2011; Lianos, 2007; Papadimitropoulos, 2008; Papakonstantinou, 2007; Saiti, 2009, 2012; Terzis, 2010; Zmas, 2007). Indeed, an excessive number of education laws, bureaucratic procedures, a lack of continuity and a dependence on political variations have been identified by many Greek researchers in education as the main drawbacks of the Greek education system (Bouzakis, 2005; Danos and Boulouta, 2012; Darra, et.al. 2010; Fassoulis, 2001; Georgogiannis, Lagios and Manika, 2005; Ifanti, 2011; Iordanidis, 2002; Macrydimitris, 1999; Papadimitropoulos, 2008; Saitis, 2008; Saiti, 2012; Spanou, 1996; Zmas, 2007).

However, the quantitative development of a legislative framework (numerically speaking) in itself does not guarantee any innovative change in the system. Indeed, these continually changing amendments of the Greek laws neither brought any efficiency or flexibility nor any modernization of the system (Danos and Boulouta, 2012; Ifanti, 2011; Lianos, 2007; Papadimitropoulos, 2008; Papakonstantinou, 2007; Saiti and Saitis, 2012). In fact, regular changes in the legislative framework can create obstacles even in their implementation since certain issues can be affected by two or more relevant laws. As a result, this phenomenon enhances suspicion among Greek citizens since they are not aware of the duration of these laws. In order to overcome this problem the relevant administration is obliged to prepare and publish the interpretation of these laws. This has led to laws which are not only greater in number but also more complex and time-consuming (Danos and Boulouta, 2012; Papadimitropoulos, 2008; Saiti, 2009; Saiti & Saitis, 2012). Therefore, the plethora of laws, the inadequacy of the legislative framework (the latter being evident from the necessity of too many signatures from the hierarchy to get a document authorised), together with organisational deficiencies, combine to create obstacles in the management system, thereby restricting flexibility and innovation (Fullan, 2006; Fullan and Miles 1992; Hargreaves and Goodson, 2006; McLaughlin 1990; Willis, 2010).

In addition, the frequent changes among Greek ministers confirm both the political and administrative discontinuity. Indeed, even over the last two years in which Greece has been suffering from severe economic problems, continual changes in Greek Ministries (including the education sector) have been a regular occurrence. And if one considers the extent of the recession in Greece's economy, then clearly any improvement in the structure of - and any positive impact of investment in - the Greek education system is being diminished. Thus, the Greek education system gives the impression that it is almost impossible to develop and implement any substantive education policy since it does not appear to have the capacity to overcome its drawbacks (especially when considering that these drawbacks have been burdening the system over a long period of time). Hence the Greek system is largely preoccupied with

implementing the latest round of changes instead of going a step further - towards their sustainability.

The one-sided emphasis and attention on quantity and the neglect of qualitative elements in reforms has hindered the initiatives, innovation and development of the system (Coburn 2003; Fullan, 2008, 2010; Hargreaves, 2002; Ifanti, 2011; Saitis, 2008; Terzis, 2010; Zmas, 2007; etc.), while it has also raised questions about the true impact of reform and the actual improvement of the system for the key players involved - referred to by Coburn (2003) as reform ownership. The continuous and growing priority given to a high number of law revisions only creates obstacles to real and sustainable change, of which the education system is in dire need. Instead, qualitative improvements should be pursued since, to a great extent, the lack of quality erodes the meaning of real reform (Elmore, 1996; Fullan, 2006; Levin and Fullan, 2008; Mclaughlin and Mitra, 2001).

This calls for some investigation into the reasons why, despite many efforts for reform, the Greek educational system remains steadfastly traditional, unable to respond to the demand for creative interaction in the development process, and incapable of introducing real and sustainable reforms that will secure more efficient and effective functionality in the education process at all levels.

Given the above, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the educational reforms that have taken place in the Greek educational system (at all levels of education) over the last few years.

Process of educational reforms

Reform is often based on the principle that there is always a better alternative to the current situation. Recognition of the need to organize is heavily associated with reform, and the desire to fulfill this need is more acute during periods of crisis. It should be noted, however, that educational reforms in public education are not an easy matter since every attempt at reform is usually met with resistance from different social groups who feel that their interests are being threatened. This resistance may be overcome only through an up-to-date and rational design by the decision makers in education. Certainly there are many thoughts and attitudes as to how an educational reform has to be designed and implemented. Fullan (2006, 2008) suggested that the actual and moral purpose of education reform is the commitment of central governments and that if they want to bring about real changes they have to understand the complex process of change that will close the gap between ‘what we want’ and ‘what should be done’ and simultaneously ‘raise the bar’. In this regard, securing the development of the educational environment would require the following stages:

- Diagnose the current situation
- Negotiate and determine the policy
- Define the measures that should be taken
- Determine the timeframe of the implementation
- Assess the result
- Reconsider a better educational system

The above six stages do not only indicate that the overhaul of an educational system demands the support of central government but also explains why any attempt at reform should be accompanied by continuity and coherence. It should follow the rhythm of pedagogical, social, economical and technological changes and be based on collaborative relationships and structures for change (Senge, et.al., 2000, p. 394 cited by Fullan 2005). Thus, educational reformers should not rely on the 'hit and miss' approach but they should first create an appropriate environment with a clear statement of purpose, values and a "picture" of the system (Hargreaves, 2002; Terzis, 2010; Willis, 2010).

To conclude, educational reform should not be approached as periodical therapy but should be seen as a long-term strategy, the success of which depends on central government support, the type of reform, the model being adopted, the attitudes of citizens, and the abilities and experience of the reformers.

Reforms in Greece

The most significant changes that occurred in the Greek education system during the period 1991 to 2011 were the following:

With law 2009 / 1992 the National System of Vocational Education and Training was established. According to the same law there was the introduction of the Institute of Vocational Training and the introductory – compulsory training of candidate educators.

With law 2043 / 1992 the assessment of educators' work in primary and secondary education was regulated by the School principal and the school counselor. Moreover, the permanency of school education leaders was established as a necessary requirement for continuity in education administration.

Within the framework of law 2026 / 1992 there was an attempt to transfer duties to prefectural authorities whereby these authorities were promoted to the status of decision-maker in their prefecture. However, in reality, the system of administration remained untouched, with only two administrative issues being transferred to prefectural authorities.

With law 2188 / 1994 the permanency of school education leaders was abolished as it was considered that a non-permanent position would bring capable educators to fill the post and there was also a restructuring of the central and regional councils of primary and secondary education.

With law 2265 / 1994 the composition of newly-elected councils for school counselors and educational leaders of primary and secondary education were established.

Under law 2218 and 2240 / 1994 the functioning of prefectural authorities was regulated.

New laws were introduced regarding teaching staff processes (both primary and secondary) (law 2525 / 1997) and administrative levels in education (law 2817 / 2000).

With law 2817 / 2000 an extra educational level in the administrative hierarchy was added, namely, the regional educational authorities of primary (and secondary) education. According to the new law the structure of the school administrative system would consist of four levels with the Ministry of Education governing the national level, the Regional Educational Authorities

(REAs[1]) at regional level, the Prefectural Educational Authorities (PEAs) at prefectural level, and the School level.

According to the Greek Law 3467 / 2006, the selection of school leaders would be based on certain criteria while the candidates would be assessed against those criteria and awarded a mark out of 100. The criteria were divided into four categories, namely: *Service Experience*, *Scientific and Pedagogical grounding and formation*, *the Personality of the candidate*, and *Assessment of the educational work*. The new law that was introduced in May 2010 (3848) although made slight amendments into the school leader selection process however the selection system has mainly remained the same. Indeed, according to the new law the selection criteria are still divided into the above categories but now the difference was that now are awarded out of 65.

According to law 3475 and 3442 / 2006 there was a restructuring of technical and vocational education. In 2008 a new law (3685) was introduced regarding the functioning of postgraduate programs and the administrative function of higher education, with particular emphasis on the responsibility for formulating teaching and research policy and the announcement and appointing of an academic post.

Another new law (Greek Law 3848 / 2010) did introduce slight amendments into the school leader selection process such as changes in the interview process and an emphasis on seniority. Moreover, in 2010 law 3852 made minor amendments to the school committee, which mainly aims to manage finances in the day-to-day running of the school and to deal with any problems regarding the school's operation. In particular, with the new law there was a merging of the school committees (previously, each school had its own school committee) with more power given to the local authorities.

In 2011, according to law 3966, pedagogical institutes were abolished and a new institute of educational policy was introduced. In particular, the duties of the new institute were more or less same as before with only slight amendments. Another law (4009) was introduced in 2011 regarding the functioning of higher education units. In particular, the new law made administrative amendments to every function of higher education institutes.

The limited impact of the education reforms in Greece during the period 1994-2011 give the impression that the majority of those changes (each introduced through a new law) were more of a replacement of former laws on education than an attempt towards the sustainable development of the education system (Ifanti, 2010; Papadimitropoulos, 2008; Papakonstantinou, 2007; Saiti, 2009). Indeed, the setting out and the implementation of education policy appears to have been short term, as these changes in the Greek education system were taking place every two or four years - a period of time that certainly is not enough to successfully implement any kind of change in a sustainable manner (Lianos, 2007; Papadimitropoulos, 2008; Saiti, 2009; Terzis, 2010).

[1] This administrative level has been established in order to help the Ministry of Education, directly or indirectly, so as to accomplish its mission whereas the degree of their involvement depends on the balance of administrative power. However, it remains unclear whether it operates as a centralised and bureaucratic organisation or as a decentralised mechanism of the state (Poulis, 2000).

This succession of laws on education was either the result of a new ruling political party or a change of the relevant Minister within that party. No doubt each subsequent Education Minister aimed to emphasize the development of the country through improvements in the education system. However, the tendency for short-term solutions often resulted in problems being hastily confronted with short-sighted interpretations. In the context of an insufficient education policy, in many cases this simply led to a restructuring of the services offered by education and certainly not to an efficient and sustainable resolution of the problem that would provide a basis for a more productive system.

In the sector of education, as with all sectors, any problem that occurs needs to be carefully confronted and interpreted, while being aware of its context. Indeed, frequent changes without any strategic planning are more likely to create new problems in aspects such as communication channels since there is little time to properly implement and assess the impact of the latest change in the system, thus leading to a "dead end" with no prospect for development and prosperity.

Discussion and Conclusion

In view of the Greek educational laws mentioned above, and that what is required is "…change for keeps and change for good" (Hargreaves, 2002, p.191), two questions arise: 1) how effective were the efforts of the Greek educational policy makers? 2) did these efforts constitute real change?

It seems that the design and implementation of the Greek educational policy in recent decades has been based upon a short term horizon where previous educational reforms were adapted but did not bring any substantial change. Coburn (2003) indicated that a real and constructive reform should endure improvement over time but also calls for some in-depth investigation in terms of change if it is to be successful. Indeed, making available the proper resources to support the change (that is, ensuring an adequate capacity of the system) and understanding the relevant agents concerning the challenges and the importance of change (shift ownership) are important elements for the sustainability of reforms (Borko, et.al., 2003; Fullan, 2005, 2006; Fullan and Miles 1992; Hargreaves and Goodson, 2006; McLaughlin 1990; Willis, 2010).

Moreover, it is generally accepted that in order to ensure long-term economic development within the current global competitive environment, this can be achieved only through high quality education. And perhaps this would have been the intention of the Greek policymakers. However, in practice, the continuous changes in education that took place in Greece without sufficient planning led the education system towards a "dead end" where "the high political cost of any substantial reform seems to be eternized" (Terzis, 2010, p. 63). Indeed, Greece's vulnerability to social pressures, acting under duress to take "quick fix" measures (Fullan, 2006, p. 13) has resulted in there being no time for motivation, for making the relevant groups 'assume ownership' of the reform, and hence for forcing the qualitative path of the change process (Fullan, 2006, p.10; Hargreaves, 2002).

But even if one considered the reforms in the Greek education system to be real and innovative, and that they were not a "quick fix", in fact the system did not actually implement those reforms. This is evident from the above descriptions of the educational laws where for a particular subject

e.g. the selection of school leaders, the Greek legislator insists on introducing laws (either new or a slightly amended version of a previous law) over a period of time. The main reason for the resistance to its implementation is "the doubt concerning accuracy and the fear that this will create more problems" (Papadimitropoulos, 2008, p. 18). Hence, the reluctance to adopt the "new" stems mainly from the hasty interpretation of the current situation as well as from the insufficiency, uncertainty and the mistrust in the relationship between the Greek State and its citizens. (Lianos, 2007;Papakonstantinou, 2007; Papadimitropoulos, 2008). Hence, as Fullan (2010, p. 120) indicated, "Along with a blind sense of urgency is mounting "pressure without the means" to act on it. This is pressure without a theory of action. It shows the failures and the goals but no way of getting there. …..Pressure without means can afford to have ridiculous goals."

So, taking into consideration that any change in education change usually aims to solve a social or economic problem (Coombs, 1968), then if Greece wants to overcome the crisis in the economy, establish a sustainable rate of development and implement meaningful reforms in education it should be prepared to follow a coherent and stable education policy that calls for the systematic treatment of all problems in education in an environment of constructive and realistic dialogue with all relevant groups, and, most importantly, to ensure that the school system has the capacity to implement and sustain the education reforms. The latter requires an understanding and motivation so as to 'convince' stakeholders of the need for the change, that it is for the better good and development of the system so as to lead to convergence in the attitudes and behaviours of all agents and the shaping of coherence around educational aims (Ainscow, Muijs and West, 2006a,b; House, 2000; Ifanti, 2011; Saiti, 2012). This was lacking in the recent educational changes mainly because the 'sense of urgency' did not leave the appropriate space for understanding the depth of change (Darra, et.al., 2010; Papadimitropoulos, 2008; Saiti, 2009; Toziou, 2012).

The future of education is determined by different objective criteria that each has its own set of values, advantages and disadvantages but any model or tool for improvement has an inherent yet invisible element in the form of techniques for strategic planning (Bouzakis, 2005; Levin and Fullan, 2008). Within the framework of education strategic planning is crucial for the achievement of the best possible results with the least possible cost in terms of human capital, time and public money. In order for this to be achieved the continuous support from the central government is of crucial importance, something that seems to be missing from the Greek reality. If the country desires to sustain a position in the global competitive environment and to enhance performance, it should concentrate more on the implementation of an innovative educational policy with continuity and less on short-term ambiguous policies that mainly serve political goals.

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